



Living with Leukemia

Air Force program provides support for delicate child

story and photos by Staff Sgt. Stacy Pearsall

The steady drone of machines, the hygienic odor of alcohol and the sterile fluorescent glare fill the corridors of the small wing at the Medical University of South Carolina. The sounds of little voices echo off the white walls as adults discuss symptoms of weakness, fever and blood loss.

Though many families might find these surroundings overwhelming, Kimberly Moore and her son Zachary find them welcoming and familiar.

Three-year-old Zachary has leukemia — acute lymphoblastic leukemia — and was diagnosed at 18 months old. Kimberly and her husband, Capt. Christopher Moore, were fortunate to have discovered it so early and fortunate to have the Air Force on their side.

Zachary Moore lies sedated on a gurney while his chemotherapy is injected.



While waiting for chemotherapy (above left), Zachary Moore plays with the cord which runs from his chest port to an intravenous bag of fluids. Zachary leads his mother, Kimberly, and Dr. John Whittle (left) down the hallway to exam room two. As the anesthesiologist prepares the medicine (above), Zachary receives some encouragement from his mother.

That support was truly needed since they were stationed overseas. "Kim and I were devastated. I didn't really know what leukemia was. I wondered if he'd die," the captain said. "We were away from family. We didn't have them to lean on, but our other support was great."

That support came in the form of friends and co-workers, but more importantly, by way of the Air Force's Exceptional Family Member Program and the Special Needs Identification and Assignment Coordination Process.

The process identifies family members with special needs for re-assignment purposes. Military members must enroll in the EFMP if they have a family member who meets an enrollment criteria, said Bill Warner, chief of Humanitarian and EFMP Assignments Branch at the Air Force Personnel Center.

"Normally enrollment is done at the base level when a special need is identified," Mr. Warner said. "The special needs coordinator provides the local military personnel flight a memo directing them to

update [the sponsor's] assignment limitation code."

Once the sponsor is enrolled, he or she maintains the ALC "Q" with an indefinite expiration. Coordinators can direct removal of the code only after they've confirmed that the family member's condition no longer exists.

For the Moores, enrollment in the program meant moving to Charleston Air Force Base, S.C., where Zachary could receive care at a nearby hospital. But his illness, combined with the stress of moving, weakened Zachary. He fell ill with fever, sending him to the hospital for two weeks.

Though he recovered, the Moores realized that anything could send Zachary back to the hospital. Hospital officials said that most children in Zachary's position lose the fight against leukemia because of other infections. So when he fell sick with pneumocystis pneumonia in August, it was an enormous setback for the family.

"It's difficult," Kimberly said, "but thanks to the help of family, friends and the Air Force, the hard times are bearable."



Zachary cries (above) about not getting to mix cheese into his bowl of grits himself. Diane Dufor (right), a nurse practitioner at the Medical University of South Carolina, checks Zachary's lungs for any sign of infection.

And for Zachary — he has his good days and his bad days. “Zach has been through more procedures and taken more drugs than most people will in their entire lives,” Captain Moore said. “If you want to know how to be a fighter, Zach knows.”

“He’s had some really tough times, and he wouldn’t still be here if not for the great medical team who takes care of him,” he said. “Sometimes dads and moms work two and three jobs to pay medical bills instead of having the luxury of spending time at home with their child. We are truly blessed and know that no matter what happens, the Air Force will take care of our family.” 🦅

